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Freedom and Forgiveness

Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB

from *Benedict's Dharma*, September 2001

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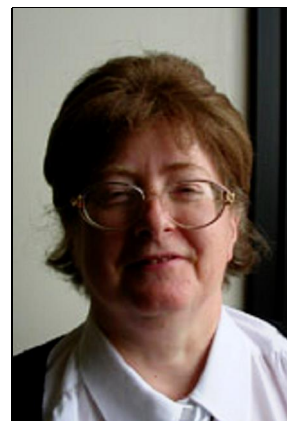
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It is by obedience and humility that we come to freedom. Several aspects of freedom are discussed in the book: the freedom of not knowing; the freedom in clear awareness; freedom from guilt, making a distinction between guilt and remorse; freedom in the mind's mirror, taking refuge in the empty nature of the Absolute; freedom from comparison; and freedom from fear. As I understand this discussion, it seems to me that freedom is connected to the practice of meditation, particularly the meditation on impermanence, by which comparing thoughts disappear and at which there is no one as a reference point for comparison. A Christian understanding of freedom, while incorporating insights derived from meditation practice, is based on theological concepts. The Judeo-Christian tradition sees freedom as embedded in human nature, in our intellect and our abilities of reason and speech, in our exercise of will, and in our capacity to choose between good and evil. I do not think that Christians can say, as does Rumi in the epigram, "Talk about choices does not apply to me." Christian living is about discernment, about choosing the narrow gate, the way of salvation, which is bound to seem narrow to start with, as it says in the prologue to the Rule. Christians believe that Christ came to proclaim freedom. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," as it says in Luke's Gospel. The presence of the spirit secures our freedom: "Now the Lord is spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is,



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

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there is freedom" (II Corinthians).

Freedom is essentially relational; it's not about doing what I want to do, sometimes it's about doing what I don't want to do. It is based on the cycle of the giving and receiving of divine energies that Christians see in the Trinity. In my community we have the experience of a Hermit Day, as we call it—once a month, a day of solitude in which we are released from the daily schedule. While I enjoy that relaxation from the daily routine, it is not necessarily a day of what I would think of as freedom, because it's alone, it's in isolation. St. Paul defines freedom as liberation from the bondage of sin and death. To be free is to be a child of God through Jesus. Creation itself is groaning in the pains of childbirth. This realization leads us to freedom when we realize that what is here now is not our ultimate destiny, as our ultimate destiny is the world to come. While this may relate somewhat to meditation on impermanence, Christian reflection is rooted in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Christ, who obeyed even unto death, is the paradigm for obedience. Obedience is the way to return to Christ," again from the Prologue.

Throughout the Rule, Jesus Christ is presented as the model for monks. Thus for many months as a junior Sister, when I was confronted with a difficult situation with a superior, one that seemed impossible to me, I found support and strength in meditating on the agony in the garden. I prayed for the grace to be able to accept what I perceived as God's will in my life. I tried to unite my own suffering, as I perceived it then, to be united with that of Christ, and in God's mystery it would bring healing, and healing not only for myself but for the world. Eventually I came to that acceptance when I was not, after all, kicked out of the community and the situation resolved—my sign that I had a vocation: not to be kicked out [laughter].

All monks—this is moving now into relationship to things—whatever the religious context of their lives, are renunciants. Renunciation of possessions and, in certain ways, family ties characterizes monastic life. The emphasis on non-attachment, generosity, and the use of material goods for the benefit of all is what we would term as stewardship. The essence of Benedictine commitment is renunciation.

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In chapter 58 of the Rule, dispossession of material possessions is symbolized by being clothed in the garments of the monastery, and this marks entry into the community. Now our sisters, before they make final vows, make a renunciation of patrimony, and it has the same connotation, the same meaning as this very radical renunciation that was symbolized in the Rule. Such renunciation is by definition total and irrevocable. After monks renounce family ties and possessions as such, they seek to renounce the passionate search for pleasure, the desire for having things and their own wills. Again, renunciation is to be conformed to the crucified and risen Christ, to imitate his poverty as manifested in his incarnation and passion. It is a following of Christ and his kenosis, his self-emptying, and the foolishness and weakness he endured for our sake. Renunciation is made in a movement of repentance, turning away from the past, to be released from a fallen state. The radical demands of renunciation are based on an understanding of human nature, which, although it is created in the image of God, is tarnished by the weakness of sin.

The aim of renunciation is to arrive at a state of apatheia, which means dispassion and may also be translated as purity of heart. St. Maximus in his first entry on love defines dispassion as a peaceful condition of the soul, in which the soul is not easily moved to evil. By controlling one's passions, one can accept affliction and acquire hope. By hope, one is able to separate one's intellect from every worldly attachment, and by detachment one arrives at love of God. It is from this free stance of love and peace of heart that we are able to exercise forbearance and to make choices that lead to justice. And this is why we cannot make choices while we are angry.

The relationship to persons and community: the authors deal with the topic of forgiveness in the context of monastic practices—this is the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, excommunication, and analogous Buddhist practices. There is a resonance within the Jewish tradition in that confession is understood as the act which brings about acquittal. Acquittal means that the person who sins is set free and any debt of guilt is discharged. Confession, giving expression to the truth, is considered as a sacrifice burned upon the altar. Quoting a great rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik:

confession is a sacrifice, a breaking of the will, a tortuous negation of human nature: to look inward to the truth, to look ourselves straight in the eye, to overcome our mechanism of self-defense, to smash asunder the artificial barriers, to go against our natural inclination to run and hide, to tear down the screen, to put into words what our hearts have already determined, so that we may desist from the violence of our hands.

In addition to the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, and especially the verse "forgive us as we forgive," the monastic practice and manifestations of the thoughts to the monastic superior or spiritual director as a means of nurturing nonviolence in thought, speech, and behavior, should, I think, be considered in this regard.

Excommunication is also seen as a tool for spiritual awakening, and I found this insight of great interest and help. I particularly appreciate the treatment of the role of doubt, which if not faced leads one to self-absorption and may make a monastic stubborn, disobedient, and proud. The process of excommunication is seen as a way of transforming spiritual crisis into awakening by bringing one to repentance and reform and to growth in trust and confidence.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of forgiveness as equivalent to the experience of non-grasping and of love as equivalent to emptiness. The first equation is clear: non-grasping is release, absolution acquittal and hence forgiveness. The second equation, love as emptiness, may seem a bit more problematic. Here I would like to suggest a third and intermediate term, which is purity. This has been a help to me personally, particularly in light of the September 11 events. Forgiveness as acquittal removes a threat of punishment. It emanates from hesed, or loving kindness. It is possible for someone to be forgiven without repentance. Purification, on the other hand, is a cleansing which wipes away any defilement caused by sin—because, when we sin, it leaves a mark upon our souls, upon our being. Purification comes from the divine attributes of judgment and truth. It

requires personal repentance. It results in a transformation of one's being. Through purity one gains a new heart, a transparent heart.

Purity of heart is a condition of nonobstruction: having nothing that can obstruct the heart's receptivity to reality or block the eye from seeing what is there. It is accepting what is real, neither adding nor subtracting. The purity of heart with which we characterize our prayer is translated as openness of heart in Chapter 20 of the Rule. Purity—openness, receptivity, acceptance, emptiness—makes it possible for love to enter, and the circle is complete.

Fewer than two weeks ago, the twin towers of the World Trade Center dominated the New York City skyline. They were not beautiful buildings. Architecturally they were plain and uninteresting, except for the fact that there were two of them. But the towers spoke to Americans and to the world of the exuberant energy of a city that never sleeps, and they became a symbol of the wealth and enterprise of the United States. And so they were cruelly struck down by the evil act of terrorists. When God struck the Tower of Babel, the nations were scattered and human language was confounded. This time, fallen towers have brought diverse peoples closer together. I hear that New Yorkers are talking to each other in the subway [laughter], they are hugging each other on the streets. In my home neighborhood, there are people of 120 languages and dialects. Now individuals of all backgrounds and languages have responded to the destruction with countless acts of extraordinary courage, kindness, and generosity. This is what will fill the gap in the skyline, the empty space where the twin towers once stood. This will allow the city to be restored and made whole.

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